Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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VIDO ENTERPRISE TO DEVELOP ANIMAL AND HUMAN VACCINES

The Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization (VIDO) at the University of Saskatchewan has secured five-years' worth of funding from Industry Canada, valued at $15 million, to fast-track vaccine development for human and animal diseases.

The new national non-profit research corporation will be known as the Pan-Provincial Vaccine Enterprise, or PREVENT.

"The activities of PREVENT will help reduce the risk of infectious diseases by taking promising early-stage vaccine candidates through pre-clinical development, thus adding significant value to them and increasing the chances of developing marketable vaccines," said Dr. Andrew Potter, VIDO/InterVac director.

PREVENT will focus both on creating new vaccines for diseases for which none currently exist, and improving vaccines that are already available. For existing vaccines, the goal will be to reduce adverse side effects, enhance protection, improve vaccine delivery and decrease production costs.

The scope of the venture is broad and will ultimately revolve around public health, but there are important ties to the livestock industry and its competitiveness. According to Potter, this will include study on zoonomic disease, E.coli O157, salmonella, BSE and prions.

VIDO's success in securing funding from Industry Canada is not based on a specific research project from the organization's past, but rather a solid reputation for identifying linkages between human and animal health.

The regulatory environment has encouraged the initiative's leaders to adopt the development of animal vaccines as an important focus. The regulatory process for approving animal vaccines is less stringent than for humans, which can take up to 10 years. Animal vaccine development will put PREVENT on the fast-track to building its own reputation.

"It will help get the company known, to get revenue flowing, and to get industry involved," Potter said.

VIDO expects funding to commence in the spring, and they already have projects planned with an April 1 start date.

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Many of the early projects of PREVENT will involve students, providing unique learning opportunities for graduate-level courses. Internships will be available.

Although the University of Saskatchewan provides a solid foundation in research, Potter notes it is rare that students have the opportunity to learn the business side of vaccine development.

"A typical student at VIDO, the Western College of Veterinary Medicine or in the medical school has seen the research side, but [he or she really has] no context where that might lead without specific training. PREVENT will provide that training," he stated.

In addition, students will learn how vaccine research ties into industry competitiveness. PREVENT differs from research projects in other countries because of the strong link between the needs of the public and the needs of industry.

According to Potter, there are many industrial competitiveness programs and a significant amount of research on public health needs, but there is often a disconnection between the two activities. PREVENT balances both goals.

The initiative will cover a wide scope, from disease research to making vaccines available in the marketplace. While developing its own reputation as a research institution, PREVENT will also contribute to the success of VIDO and the University of Saskatchewan, and will advance the province's reputation in the field of science and technology.

According to Potter, "It's going to be good for the country, and it's certainly going to be good for Saskatchewan."

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REGINA-BASED VENTURE UNCAPS GLUTEN-FREE "BEER"

A Regina-based company owned by over 200 Western Canadian seed growers is providing an alternative alcoholic beverage to people with celiac disease and wheat allergies.

Nubru Gluten Free, developed by FarmPure Beverages, is about to sell out of its first 6,000 cases of product that have been tested in the Manitoba market.

FarmPure uses an innovative, patented process. "We're making a clear, neutral concentrate out of protein sources, such as peas and soybeans," said Chief Operating Officer Carl Flis. "From that concentrate, we can do two things – we can formulate it to taste like any beer in the world, make coolers, wine coolers and fruit coolers; or we can license that technology out to existing breweries." FarmPure Beverages plans to pursue both options.

FarmPure Beverages production innovation will be attractive for other breweries. "By implementing the technology, they can reduce their production costs significantly, because we're reducing the traditional brewing time, which is 21 to 28 days, down to nine to 11 days," Flis said. "An existing brewery can increase the production of their plant without any capital investment."

The first test with FarmPure Beverages' own product line was the Nubru blend, which was a 50/50 blend of FarmPure's product and Fort Garry Lager. The advantages of blending are that it reduces costs and improves the head of the beer.

Since the original Nubru blend, FarmPure Beverages has developed the Nubru Gluten Free beverage, which is currently being distributed in the Manitoba marketplace. Upcoming products include Nubru Red, which is similar to Rickard's Red, and a cider.

The gluten-free market of food and beverage products promises growth. According to Flis, celiac disease is the fastest growing diagnosed disease in North America. An estimated one in 133 has the disease. "We're not there to build breweries around the world. It's a specialty market, and celiac patients and people with wheat allergies are looking for alternatives."

Although the target market for the Nubru line is people with celiac disease and other digestive disorders, the product has broader appeal. In its first round of market testing, Nubru was rated on par or better than traditional light beers. It scored especially well with the young female segment of the market.

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FarmPure Beverages has an ambitious plan for the distribution of its products, but first, it will strive for brand recognition. "It's a new technology where the possible products we can generate are endless. At this stage, it's getting the first concepts out there, getting the name known, and then we can start further product development," Flis said.

Next, they plan to expand into Ontario and Quebec, then British Columbia. Europe already has a number of gluten-free products, based on rice and millet, using traditional brewing processes. Breweries there have tried to emulate the traditional European beer tastes.

The Nubru products have a North American taste. The market is attractive to FarmPure Beverages because there are fewer competitors. Flis names a Quebec-based company and Budweiser, with a product called Red Ridge, as the two main rivals.

"If Budweiser is getting into the market, I think we're on the right track," he said.

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PRAIRIE DOME BLENDS DIVERSITY WITH INNOVATION

The Prairie Dome farm, on Highway 9 south of Yorkton, boasts an eclectic mix of strawberries, saskatoons, seed potatoes, wheat and barley. Because of the unique challenges of operating in a specialty market, partners Kirk Flaman and Elwyn Vermette have had to create and adapt their own technologies to serve Prairie Dome's production needs.

Prairie Dome allocates 150 acres to seed potatoes and 200 acres to grain. They also grow five acres of strawberries and two acres of saskatoons, making the farm a Yorkton-area landmark for over 20 years to people wanting to pick their own fruit in the summer. The farm employs eight full-time staff, and part-time helpers' number from five to 20.

Seed potato production is an important line of business for the farm. Their most popular potato varieties are Viking, Yukon Gold and Norland. The three varieties are well-suited to Saskatchewan's climate. In addition, Caribe and Russet Burbank are good options. "It depends on where you plant them and the soil you have, but most grow very well," said Kirk Flaman.

The addition of grain came three years ago, as part of Prairie Dome's crop rotation methods. Potatoes are planted every four years, with wheat, barley and summer fallow filling in the rotation. "The more years you can separate planting on a piece of land, the less disease you will build up over time," Flaman stated.

Seed potato production methods do not differ significantly from table potato production methods, although a higher level of attention is paid to disease control to maximize production. In addition, seed potato lots are smaller and more varied. According to Flaman, a table grower might plant a thousand acres to a single variety of potato.

Prairie Dome also grows more than one generation of potato. "We buy 'nuclear potatoes,'" Flaman explained, noting the term has nothing to do with radiation. "They're disease-free; they're a potato that we plant and propagate for the next three years. We sell them in the fourth year to a table grower." The table grower will use the seed for one or two years, then will seek a new generation.

Prairie Dome uses specialized equipment, mostly consisting of chains and conveyors, to separate the dirt and the potatoes. It differs from table growers' equipment in that it is much smaller. As well, Prairie Dome has customized its own equipment to serve its seed operation, including grading lines for size and quality.

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The strawberry operation has also required innovation. "Most of our strawberry equipment is custom-made, as well," said Flaman. "Mostly, it comes down to what works best, and the cost. New equipment costs quite a bit, and it may need to be modified anyway, so we figure out what works, how it works, and either go with something new or make it up and modify it to our exact needs."

Ideal growing conditions for strawberries and potatoes are quite similar. Flaman describes perfect conditions as "rain at the right time, lots of sunshine, lots of moisture to start off with, and no diseases." This winter, precipitation levels are down from last year, but he notes that the abundance of moisture from the fall will help. Flaman hopes for a wet spring.

For the future of Prairie Dome, labour market conditions will guide how Flaman and Vermette approach expansion. They seek to automate as many processes as they can to minimize their reliance on labour. "Other than that, the moon is the limit for where a person wants to go."

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VETERINARIANS' MONTH MARKS ASSOCIATION'S 100TH ANNIVERSARY

If you've ever owned an animal, be it for companionship or to earn a living, chances are you've relied on the services of a veterinarian at some point.

This year, the association that has played such a large role in the advancement and professional development of the province's animal caregivers over the years turns 100.

The Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association (SVMA) has approximately 580 registered members. The majority are practicing veterinarians, operating private practices throughout the province. Some are employed by the federal and provincial governments, mostly in agencies like the Canadian Food Inspection Agency or Prairie Diagnostic Services, while roughly 100 work at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon. Others are veterinarians who are retired or work outside the province, but want to continue receiving SVMA information or attending association conferences.

According to its mission statement, the SVMA is an organization dedicated to the protection of the public by ensuring the proficiency, competency and ethical behaviour of its members in the practice of veterinary medicine.

"The association regulates the practice of veterinary medicine in the province, provides member services for our veterinarians, and serves as an information source for lay people and special interest groups," said Dr. Curt Hagele, the Registrar for the SVMA.

"We like to think we're a group that is responsible in some small way for maintaining reasonable standards of animal welfare. We think that our veterinarians are some of the best individuals to coach people with either companion animals or livestock on humane animal care, nutrition and what have you."

As the provincial licensing body for the profession, Hagele says part of the SVMA's responsibility includes organizing continuing education opportunities for members, such as training programs and conferences. The association requires that members attend a minimum number of hours of continuing education activities every year, both to maintain their technical skills and to help them with the management of their practices.

The SVMA also oversees an inspection program that sees every practice in the province inspected at least once every five years by a veterinarian who is not in a practice. All aspects of the operation are

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scrutinized, including the cleanliness of the facility, the state of equipment, the condition of medications and the maintenance of medical records. Even the vehicles used by veterinarians who do farm calls are inspected.

"What people might not realize is that most every veterinary practice that offers a full range of services actually has all the bells and whistles that you would find in a human hospital," Hagele said, citing x-ray machines, gas anesthetic devices and blood analysis equipment as examples.

"So the inspection process is quite detailed, taking the better part of a half-day. This is something we do to ensure that the public is getting good quality veterinary care for whatever class of animals they've got."

Hagele says the SVMA and the province's veterinarians realize the important role they perform in Saskatchewan's agricultural industry. "In agriculture, the veterinarian's role is to help maintain that bottom line as being a profitable one," he noted.

In appreciation of the vital service veterinarians provide, the Government of Saskatchewan has declared June 2008 the first-ever Veterinarians' Month in the province. Coinciding with the SVMA's 100th anniversary, Hagele feels it is a fitting tribute.

"It's a real milestone," Hagele said. "We think we've worked hard to have an active and vital group of veterinarians who are interested in animal welfare, animal health and the economics of animal agriculture – working to improve the profitability of livestock producers as best they can, protecting that industry, and protecting the pet-owning public and those who require service animals."

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SASKATOON TO HOST PROVINCIAL VETERINARIANS' CONFERENCE

Many believe that veterinarians are among the most skilled doctors in the medical profession, since they can't ask their patients where it hurts or what the symptoms are, but simply have to figure it out for themselves.

"Yes, I guess some would say that," said Dr. Curt Hagele, the Registrar of the Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association (SVMA). "Veterinarians are certainly trained to do a good, proper physical exam and come to a diagnosis. But, of course, the history we get from the animal's owner is also very important."

Another major factor in maintaining their impressively sharp skill set is the ongoing professional development and continuing education activities that veterinarians are required to take as part of their licensing requirements.

As the provincial body responsible for licensing and regulating the veterinary practice in Saskatchewan, the SVMA, together with the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVM), organizes an annual conference that provides an opportunity for the veterinary community to learn about the latest developments in the field.

This year's conference takes place June 18 to 21 in Saskatoon. Entitled Celebrating a Century of Progress, the event coincides with the 100th anniversary of the SVMA.

"Because we require our members to take a certain amount of scientific continuing education, we always put on a conference where we bring in speakers from inside and outside the province to bring our members up to date on the newest techniques, the newest drugs, the newest machinery and such that is available for them to use in their practices," Hagele said.

"This year is no exception. In fact, we're nearly doubling the budget this year, bringing in what we would consider to be world-class veterinarians and scientists to present the latest information to our members."

Part of the conference's program will be separated into two streams, with sessions that focus on veterinary care for companion animals like dogs and cats running concurrently with sessions that concentrate on large animals such as livestock.

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This enables veterinarians to participate in the areas they feel are most relevant to their particular practices, Hagele said, with many delegates taking in seminars from both streams.
The conference also features "wet labs," hands-on workshops with live animals that offer something different than the usual audience presentations. In addition, there are plenary sessions more oriented towards the business management side of operating a practice. A trade show held in conjunction with the event likewise offers veterinarians an opportunity to speak with representatives from pharmaceutical companies, equipment suppliers and publishers of scientific journals.

Hagele expects a tour of the WCVM to be a popular draw this year. "The WCVM has been undergoing a rather significant remodeling and expansion of their facilities and their physical plant, so we are going to have a tour of all the new labs and lecture rooms," he noted.

"Many of our veterinarians are alumni of the Western College, and they will be able to see just how much the place has changed since they were there."

Another highlight will be the Black Tie Gala Awards Banquet, where the very first J.J. Murison Distinguished Veterinarian Award will be presented to recognize one of Saskatchewan's veterinarians for a lifetime of outstanding service.

Murison was the very first registrar of the SVMA back in 1908, and played a major role in the association's establishment. The award was previously known as the SVMA Veterinarian of the Year, but Hagele said the association's centennial offered a great opportunity to incorporate the change and honour one of the profession's pioneers in the province.

With a strong and diverse agricultural industry, a world-class veterinary college, and now the VIDO and InterVac facilities, the conference will be a platform to celebrate Saskatchewan's proud history and bright future in the field of veterinary medicine.

Registration information and the complete program for the Celebrating a Century of Progress conference can be found on the SVMA's website at www.svma.sk.ca.

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